

## Unlocking Access to Computer Skills San Francisco Chronicle Open Forum

By Ethel Long-Scott

Judging from how eagerly young, disadvantaged people take to creative problem-solving on computers, you wouldn't think that our society is being undermined by the unfair and unequal distribution of computers and the knowledge of how to use them. But it is, and that makes the future dicey for millions of low-income young women and young mothers.

At the Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP), we see eagerness, enthusiasm and aptitude bursting forth in our high-technology computer training lab every day. It is gratifying to see young people, whom traditional institutions have written off, grow in confidence as their skills develop, as they gain the courage to take on leadership roles. They become more outspoken as they discover that they do have the ability to identify problem and solve them.

It gives us hope, even as it makes us wonder why a society so rich in resources and promise seems so determined to shut out – and shut down – so many of its lower-income women and the children and families they bear.

The future of women in the next millennium is tied to many things. Among the most important is attacking the class and the racial barriers in this country. We are gearing our Women and Family Center in downtown Oakland to do just that. Among other things, we have taken advantage of volunteers in architecture and other professions from many communities to renovate the center with creativity and inspiration. We put in all-new wiring for video-conferencing, we networked the computers to allow skills training and installed 100 high-speed outlets for Internet access.

Our vision of a national demonstration model combining universal technology access, with a focus on job development, economic security, justice, women's advancement and urban revitalization is shared by our public and private partners who are helping us with grants and loans.

Three years ago the city of Oakland, eager to spur community-based revitalization, lent us \$2.3 million to buy the four-story downtown office building in which we set up our women's center. The center is an

economic development project designed to provide technological training, to foster development of women and minority-owned businesses and to involve grassroots leadership in community revitalization.

It's clear to us that an understanding of new technology, and familiarity with it, is one of the keys that will provide access to opportunities for women in to-morrow's even more high-tech world.

Nearly 4 million people are living below the poverty level in California. In Alameda County alone, 78,000 people are in the midst of a forced transfer from the former AFDC (Aid to Families With Dependent Children) program to the state-run CalWorks. The enormity of their plight – and the steady increase in their numbers – is lost these days in glowing media reports of what a wonderful economy we are enjoying.

Our public officials and the gatekeepers who tell us what to think about seem blind to what we at WEAP and other nonprofit community organizations see every day – the tragedies that happen to families as they fall through the ever-widening chasms in what remains of the social safety net. Environmentalists who claim that the country's natural resources are being wasted are only now beginning to focus on the even more tragic waste of human resources. In a country that seems determined to showcase how it rewards its rich while hiding how it wages war on its poor, promises of prosperity in the next millennium can sound awfully hollow.

WEAP has also been involved in several local and national efforts to shape an open-access technology policy. Because the lack of computer skills closes off so many avenues of opportunity, gaining the knowledge and the access to information technology should be as easy as gaining access to a telephone.

Our plan at WEAP is driven by this enormous importance that computerized technology has so recently gained in all our lives. It is a significant training opportunity for the poorest of the poor, especially those in transition from welfare to work. There is a direct connection between the ability of people to use computers to solve problems and the social and economic problems WEAP and other organizations are focused on.

It is not just about jobs. We see the possibilities of a city where people too poor to own a car can reach out all over the nation through computers to learn what ways others have found to resist peer pressure, to make schools safer, to hold their elected officials and law enforcement agencies more accountable, to find out what the history texts don't discuss, to increase justice.

Direct job skills are important, but learning how to use computers can also teach how many doors open when people have the ability to explore more options and gain the courage to stand up and speak out for what they believe in and what they need.